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Beluga at Risk in Ungava and Eastern Hudson Bays

Government Publications

years, Inuit hunters have been observing changes and declines in beluga stocks summering in Ungava and The Species at Risk Act encourages users and researchers or the recovery of these two stocks. The goal of this everyone better understand the situation.

Hudson Bay and Ungava beluga stocks experienced intensive hunting conducted primarily by the Hudson Bay Company in the 900s. There is evidence that both stocks suffered serious declines of this commercial activity.

Beluga harvest statistics from the Nunavik Inuit, which shows that catches for some communities began declining in response, Makivik Corporation and the Department of Fisheries began to work together on research projects in Nunavik. A study flown in 1981, indicating that the number of belugas summering in eastern Hudson Bay and Ungava Bay could not support high levels of harvesting. Surveys in 1985, 1993 and 2001 showed that the situation had deteriorated. An additional concern is the low rate of reproduction, an interval of one calf every three years.



Beluga According to Inuit
(Makivik Corporation)

In 1988 the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) classified the eastern Hudson Bay stock and the Ungava Bay stock as **endangered**. The Beluga population for all populations in Canada is currently being reviewed, last updated for May 2005.

Under the terms of land claims agreements, Inuit in Nunavik have constitutionally protected rights to hunt, subject to the principles of conservation.



How is the status of endangered wildlife determined in Canada?

The status of wildlife species in Canada is assessed by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC), an independent advisory organization made up of sub-committees of specialists. COSEWIC can recommend a status for a species or a population (group of related individuals) based on quantitative criteria such as a decline in total population or a low or declining number of breeders.

More recently, consequent to the passing of the Species at Risk Act, provisions are included to ensure the inclusion of Traditional Ecological Knowledge in the COSEWIC review and recommendation process.

The status categories used by COSEWIC to designate species, in decreasing order of gravity, are:

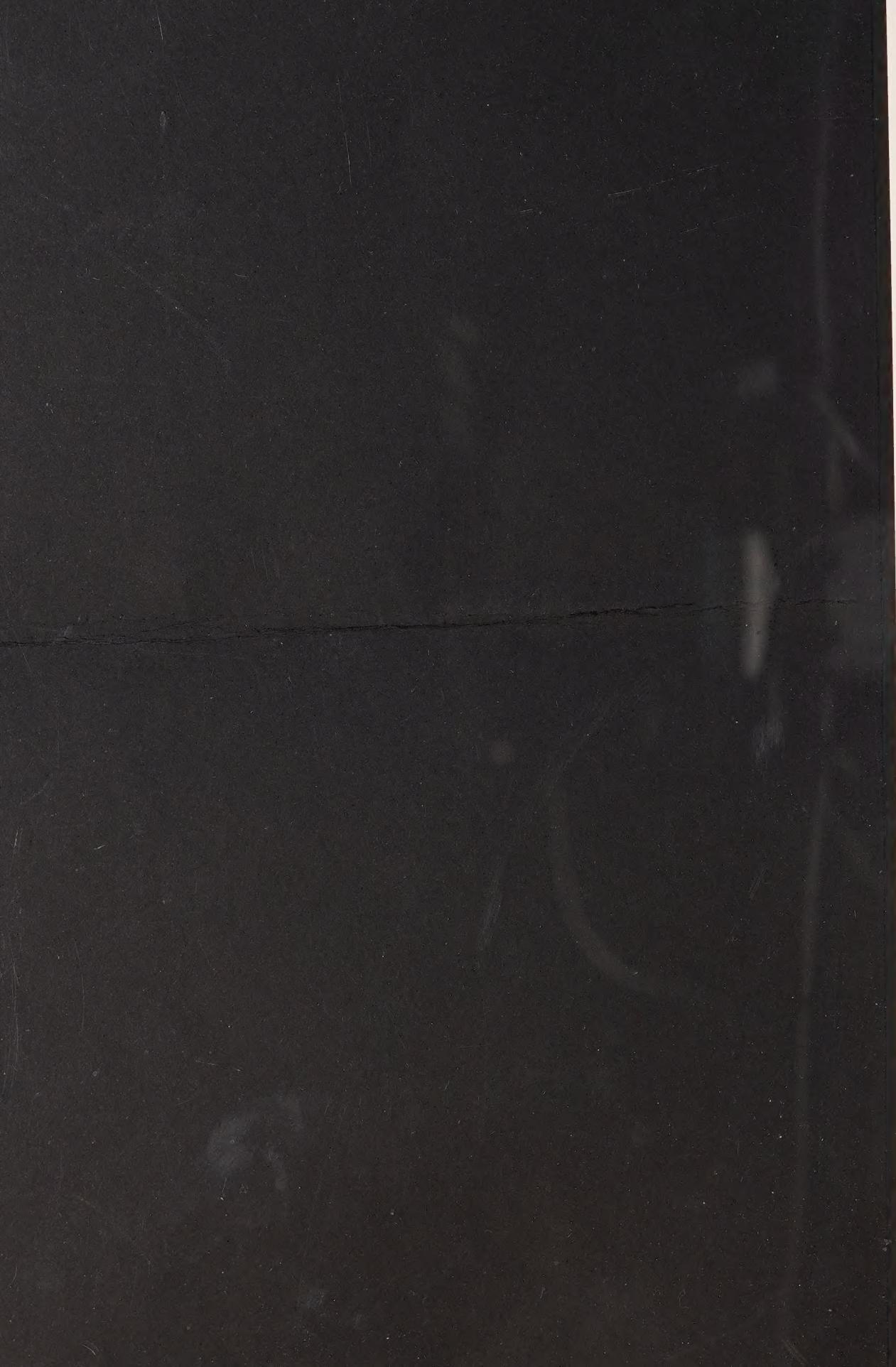
- **extinct (in the world)**
- **extirpated in Canada**
- **endangered**
- **threatened**
- **of special concern**
- **not at risk**

Any person may apply to COSEWIC for an assessment of the status of a wildlife species.

For more information: www.cosewic.gc.ca

Canada and Species at Risk

The preservation of species at risk has been a concern to Canadians for many years. In 1992, Canada was the first industrialized country to sign the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity. In 1996, the Federal-Provincial Accord for the Protection of Species at Risk in Canada was signed, and in 2003, the *Act respecting the protection of wildlife species at risk in Canada (Species at Risk Act)* was passed into law.



Beluga at Risk

in Ungava and Eastern Hudson Bays

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Over the past 15 years, Inuit hunters have been observing changes and researchers reporting declines in beluga stocks summering in Ungava and eastern Hudson Bay. The *Species at Risk Act* encourages users and researchers to work together for the recovery of these two stocks. The goal of this document is to help everyone better understand the situation.

Both the eastern Hudson Bay and Ungava beluga stocks experienced intensive commercial hunts conducted primarily by the Hudson Bay Company in the mid 1800s to early 1900s. There is evidence that both stocks suffered serious declines as a result of this commercial activity.

The recording of beluga harvest statistics from the Nunavik Inuit, which began in 1974, shows that catches for some communities began declining in the late 1970s. In response, Makivik Corporation and the Department of Fisheries and Oceans began to work together on research projects in Nunavik. Aerial surveys were flown in 1981, indicating that the number of beluga estimated to be summering in eastern Hudson Bay and Ungava Bay could not tolerate continued high levels of harvesting. Surveys in 1985, 1993 and 2001 indicated that the situation had deteriorated. An additional concern is the low reproductive rate — an interval of one calf every three years.



Seasonal Distribution of Beluga According to Inuit Knowledge (courtesy of Makivik Corporation)

stock as threatened, and the Ungava Bay stock as endangered. The Beluga Whale Status report for all populations in Canada is currently being reviewed, with a release anticipated for May 2005.

Through their land claims agreements, Inuit in Nunavik have constitutionally protected rights to harvest, subject to the principles of conservation.

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Threats to the Beluga

Hunting Pressure

The Inuit subsistence hunt has continued to remove animals from the same stocks since the end of commercial hunting. With the introduction of motors in the 1960s and their increased use over subsequent decades, hunters have been able to cover larger distances in their hunting territories. This, along with a rapidly increasing Inuit population, has resulted in a marked increase in hunting pressure resulting in a continued decline of the beluga stock that summers along the eastern Hudson Bay coast.

Changes in hunting skills

During this same period, Inuit began to express concerns that the expertise and knowledge required to hunt beluga efficiently were being lost, especially among younger people. Experienced hunters worried that animals were being harassed and use of improper weapons and lack of retrieval skills were causing more wounded animals to be lost.

Disturbance by noise

The tendency for both beluga stocks to return to the same respective estuarine locations in the summer increases their vulnerability. With no other available habitat, the beluga return there each year and they must cope with hunting and considerable noise disturbance from motorized boat traffic.

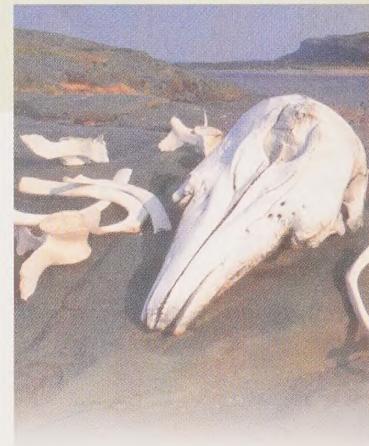
Current Recovery Actions

MANAGEMENT PLANS

Over the past years, DFO, Makivik Corporation, the Kativik Regional Government and the Nunavik Hunting, Fishing and Trapping Association have developed a solid partnership approach for the management of beluga. Whereas a recovery strategy is to outline a long term, broad philosophy or strategy that will lead to the recovery of beluga, a management plan is concerned with the short term needs to manage the hunt such as the setting of quotas, identifying best hunting practices, etc. Under a recovery strategy, hunting can continue as long as it still allows the population to recover. The quotas that would allow the population to recover in order to meet the expectations of a recovery strategy are defined within a management plan. **In 1986, the first Nunavik Beluga Management Plan was developed.** It set quotas, established management zones, created sanctuaries and closures, set hunting seasons and permissible hunting techniques.

The beluga hunt in Nunavik is now regulated through a three-year management plan (2001-2003) which allows for annual adjustment of community and regional quotas upon availability of new scientific and local information.

This management plan is implemented by DFO Fisheries Management in collaboration with the Kativik Regional Government who under the Aboriginal Fishery Strategy is contracted to organize the gathering of harvest statistics and monitor catches. This arrangement also provides for the **hiring of local fishery guardians and community agents.** Their support is an important part in building the capacity of local communities to manage their harvesting.



Whale

Habitat degradation

Industrial development is also part of this complex picture. Hydroelectric development has already changed the flow regimes of the La Grande and Koksoak Rivers. Other river systems, particularly the Whale/Mucalic Rivers in Ungava Bay and the Little Whale and Nastapoka Rivers in eastern Hudson bay, contain the only estuaries in Nunavik where beluga continue to aggregate.

These areas of critical habitat used by beluga have known hydroelectric potential. Any changes to the freshwater regimes at the estuaries of these rivers could have a major impact on the health of these two stocks.

Climate Change

Finally, while it is impossible at this time to predict with certainty what, if any, the effects of climate change on beluga may be, Inuit and scientists are aware that any changes in water temperature, salinity and the distribution of sea ice could affect beluga in the future.



RESEARCH

Collaborative research efforts between DFO Science and Makivik have also been developed to support management efforts. **Research projects on the effects of disturbance from noise**, as well as satellite tracking of Eastern Hudson Bay belugas have involved local Inuit and their organizations. Inuit hunters provide skin samples from the hunt for genetic analysis to **assist in the identification of different beluga stocks** and to help determine which stock the hunt is affecting. Inuit are also continuing to report their harvests, along with information on sex, colour, location and other relevant information that the hunters may wish to provide.

OUTREACH EFFORTS

Several important outreach efforts have been organized. In early 2003, for example, KRG organized a visit by a group of Inuit elders to DFO's research facility at **Mont-Joli, Quebec, to exchange scientific and traditional knowledge** with DFO personnel. **Following this exchange, the elders conducted community tours** and radio programs to explain the purposes and features of the beluga management plan and work to assist hunters in managing their individual and community harvests. A video, *Beluga in Nunavik – Traditional and Scientific Knowledge Exchanges*, was also produced for airing in the communities.

A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

Nunavut Inuit in the communities of western Hudson Bay hunt whales that mix with the eastern Hudson Bay stock in Hudson Strait during the spring and fall migrations. Hunters from Sanikiluaq may also be taking animals from the eastern Hudson Bay stock. **For this reason Nunavik Inuit are working with Nunavut Inuit** with the objective of achieving a consensus on possible quotas and management measures of shared beluga stocks acceptable to all harvesters. Central in this objective is the notion of sustainable harvest of beluga whales.

Finally, as required under the new *Species at Risk Act*, a **recovery team** has been established to develop a recovery strategy for these two beluga stocks. The composition of the team reflects a cooperative and inclusive approach where all groups with a vested interest participate in the development of strategies or actions to assist in the recovery of these beluga stocks. In this way traditional knowledge and scientific information can be exchanged and experiences shared around a common objective: the recovery of the Ungava Bay and Eastern Hudson Bay beluga stocks.



Whale hunting is a very important part of the Inuit hunting tradition. In many ways, the skill and knowledge required to hunt walrus and beluga whales defines an Inuk hunter. Inuit also consider beluga an important food source. Consumption patterns, however, are changing with dietary preferences being most evident between younger generations and their elders. Consequently, whale meat may become less sought after by Nunavimut. The skin, or muktuk, remains a delicacy among all generations and is highly desired by all communities.



A Call for Action

"Something for sure is going on out there with our beluga. We have to better understand each other or the beluga may be gone." (an Inuk Elder)

The known and implied causes of the decline in these two beluga stocks are man-made: commercial hunting, subsistence hunting, industrial development and environmental degradation. The recovery of the populations is in our hands—Inuit hunters, managers, governments. We must continue to work together, using the best of our collective traditional and scientific knowledge and all of the management tools available to us.

Suggested Reading

Fisheries and Oceans Canada Executive Summary: *Proceedings of the Workshop on Traditional and Contemporary Knowledge of Nunavik Belugas*. 1994.

Fisheries and Oceans Canada. *Northern Quebec (Nunavik) Beluga*, Stock Status Report E5-30(2002). Quebec. 2002.

The Species at Risk Act (SARA)

- ▶ Once a wildlife species has been designated under SARA, it automatically becomes forbidden to kill, harm, harass, capture or take an individual, as well as to damage or destroy its habitat. Notwithstanding, provisions in the legislation permit possible continued subsistence harvesting of listed species subject to certain conditions, one of which is the completion of a recovery strategy stating recovery objectives. The purpose of the recovery strategy is to encourage or favour the recovery of northern Quebec (Nunavik) beluga stocks over the longer term.
- ▶ For species that are extirpated in Canada, endangered or threatened, the competent minister must prepare a strategy for their recovery.
- ▶ Fisheries and Oceans Canada is responsible for aquatic species and in this capacity is mandated to enforce prohibitions, to develop recovery strategies and action plans in partnership with stakeholders.
- ▶ A recovery strategy includes a description of the species and its needs, an identification of the threats to the survival of the species and threats to its critical habitat, a statement of the population and distribution objectives that will assist the recovery and survival of the species, and a schedule of recovery activities.

For more information: www.speciesatrisk.gc.ca

What are the implications of SARA for Beluga and Inuit harvesting?

The Species at Risk Act requires that a recovery strategy be developed for each species at risk. Under the new Act, harvesting of species at risk can only take place through a recovery strategy. A recovery strategy may, as a last resort, recommend that hunting be stopped entirely. If this occurs, then the responsible co-management boards and DFO will have to decide on implementation of the recommendation.



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